

A bumper sticker I saw recently said: “No farms, No food.” An important reminder of the quiet but essential role American agriculture plays in the well-being of our society.

Agriculture today contributes not only to food security but also to energy security and economic security. As Congress begins the process of writing a new Farm Bill (the House Ag Committee held a series of hearings on the matter earlier in the year), it is more important than ever that the American public have a clear, working understanding of agriculture’s profound benefits to our nation.

Americans no longer have the hands-on knowledge of agriculture and farm life they once did. Farming and caring for food animals are now remote concepts to a vast majority of our population. Over the last 100 years, we have become an increasingly urban society. In 1910, nearly one-third of the American workforce was farmers, and there were more than 6.5 million farms. Today, less than one percent of America’s population (less than one million people) claim farming as their principal occupation and there are just over 2 million farms.

Despite this decline in farm families, growing numbers of Americans are increasingly interested in where their food comes from and how it is produced. While this presents a challenge for American farmers to more aggressively share the stories of their businesses and livelihoods, I believe it is also an important opportunity.

Throughout our nation’s history, the story of the American farmer has been a proud one held in high esteem and veneration. George Washington called agriculture “the most useful, the most healthful, the most noble employment of man.” He said, “I know of no pursuit in which more important service can be rendered to any country than by improving its agriculture.”

Thomas Jefferson wrote: “Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bands.”

And a more modern day statesman of the last century, who once happened to represent the First Congressional District of Nebraska, William Jennings Bryan, said: “Burn down your cities

and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.”

In some ways, the traditional respect afforded agriculture has changed today. In many important ways, it has not. Many Americans still hold an idyllic view of agriculture. Consider the popularity of Facebook’s farm simulation game “Farmville.” Most Nebraskans know well that farm life is not so simple as Farmville. There’s bad weather, mechanical failures, broken fences. There are calves born, and not on their own, at 3 am. There’s much more that can go wrong, and a lot of times, it does.

But it is an honorable and disciplined way of life. American farmers, now as much as ever, continue a tradition of excellence and craftsmanship in trade. Through years of trial and error, of perseverance and resilience, of learning and doing, they craft their handiwork with uncommon patience and skill. As stewards of the land and caretakers of animals, farmers draw forth from the natural environment nourishment for their fellow man.

Modern agriculture is not only about ensuring that our nation has a safe, affordable food supply. It is also helping decrease our energy reliance on the Middle East, using resources in the Midwest instead to create clean, renewable fuel. At the same time, it is about revitalizing and reshaping rural America as an exciting, vibrant place to operate businesses and raise families.

And it is a richly diverse field. As one of the top farm states in the nation, Nebraska is home to all kinds of agricultural operations. The tremendous innovation and efficiency of our larger producers helps feed the world and maintain agriculture as one of the few sectors of our economy where we hold a positive trade balance.

Other producers have chosen to add value to their operations by branding their products and selling them directly to consumers in local stores, at farmers markets, or over the Internet. This is an entrepreneurial way for farmers to tell their stories and increase profits. Regardless of size or focus of operation, a vast majority of Nebraska farms are working family farms, operated by responsible producers who care for their resources and seek to leave things better off than how they found them.

Today’s farm policy should support a full range of responsible agricultural practices. And that policy support needs to reflect public support. I believe that the more producers from states like

Nebraska can share the stories of their family businesses, and their passion for being responsible stewards and neighbors, the easier it will be to convince urban Americans that agriculture is valuable to them in ways they may not even realize.